WHAT HAPPENED TO MOTHERS DAY?
Ephesians 5:21,31-6:4
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Most of us can recall Mothers Day, and every boy, one man and many women too, coming with a carnation in his or her lapel: white if mother was dead, red to indicate that she was alive. It was always a secular holiday but the church gladly embraced it, celebrated it and enjoyed it. Commenting on what used to be, Professor Paul Ramsay of the Religion Department at Princeton wrote recently, "Mother's day said and did something for the passage into maturity that had deep significance." I was surprised to read that because no one is writing that sort of sentiment any more.

The answer to the question, "What Happened to Mather's Day", is a portrait of the dramatic changes which have occurred in our culture in the past two decades. What happened? Well for one thing, the whole business began to suffer under Madison Avenue's frontal assault. Florists, Candy companies, Restaurants, & Greeting Card firms created a whole new business potential of the one day everyone - except mother.

Everyone agreed that mothers are special people and that it's a good idea to say thank you to them on occasion. But it became, and is today, pretty commercial, and altogether sentimental. Thoughtful people began to reject. Psychologists started talking about something called "Momism": psychiatrists reread their Freud and for several decades blamed overly zealous mothers for most of the problems of the world. Literature created a whole new characterization called the "Jewish Mother", which reached its height, or depth - depending on your point of view - in Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint.

an unhealthy infatuation with mythologized by the day set aside to observe it.

not a racial category, but a synonym for overbearing, overprotective, "clean-your-plate

Well,

As a result we stopped wearing carnations in church, in fact stopped talking about Mother's Day in church, and instead started worrying and feeling guilty about being mothers or fathers. The word was out that less rather than more parenting was best: that children should not be thwarted, oppressed, or inhibited by parental morals; that there were so many serious mistakes to be made in being a mother or father, it was impossible not to make most of them. I never thought we became permissive so much as worried, anxious, guilty. Professor Ramsay writes: "Ours is the only era in the entire history of human life on this planet in which the 'elders' of the tribe ask its newer members what the tribal rules and standards of expected behavior should be." (Theology Today, April 1979, p. 8) The late Margaret Mead wrote that "we give our adolescents more freedom and less guidance than any society in the world." (Christian Century, May 9, 1979, p. 523) And Colleges, refelcting our insecurity and uncertainty o[illegible] in parenting have simply stopped, in most cases, trying to be responsible for student moral or personal behavior - in the name of freedom and progress. Observes Duke Professor, William Willimon, "Too many college freshmen get the message from their college's administration, 'We don't care if you bomb out, destroy yourself, ruin your future, or fail to live up to your potential.' That's your problem, not ours.'" (Christian Century, 5/9/79, Remember Mama)

* She also kept the matter in perspective by observing that no generation of young people thought very highly of their parents opinions. Here is the first count of parents to agree

What Happened to Mother's Day? We got scared and just at the moment when our whole culture was feeling uncertain about family and parenting, the 1960's broke apart in what one commentator called the cultural equivalent of a nervous breakdown. In matters of authority, sex, education, the arts, music, life style, everything came unglued. Middle class parents discovered that they were foreigners in their own country, unable even to speak the language. Just when we needed all the resources and strength we could muster we discovered that the extended family, upon which we depend for that strength and those resources, was gone, a casualty of mobility. In its place stood a fragile remainder, something the sociologists called the nuclear family; mother, father, children, alone. The nuclear family, a unique phenomenon was simply not equipped to do what we were calling upon it to do and it began to crack.

What happened to Mother's Day? That, but most dramatically of all, Women's liberation; the whole new consciousness that mothering takes only a portion of life; that women are people apart fromthe men they marry; that there is no difference at all in capabilities, skills, potential. Women looked at marriage and mothering and got angry. They discovered something their husbands knew all along, namely that they were doing most of the parenting, 99 hours per week as an average figure, while their husbands, in the name of providing for the household, were simply abdicating parental responsibilities. Sociologist Sarane Boocock writes, "Addiction to work provides a guilt-free rationali-

zation for the father's lack of commitment to child rearing." (Christian Century, op cit, p. 523)

My impression is that much of what I have been talking about has slowed: that the strident voices of radical social change are a bit more moderate: that we are free, once again, to talk rationally about motherhood and fatherhood; even to celebrate it. Who knows, maybe in another ten years we'll be back to wearing carnations.

But before we move toward a recovery, think with me about what the Bible has to say on the subject. There are, unfortunately, no pat prescriptions for effective parenting. There are plenty of models, and more than a few disastrous family situations. But underneath it all is the clear Biblical assertion that the family is not an accident, not even an arrangement of biological convenience, but the way God wants human life to be lived - in community, in intimacy, in relationship. Inherent in the Biblical position is that parenting is not only necessary but an honorable state of affairs, a vocation - if you will; and that honoring parents is one of the necessary building blocks in any society which hopes to survive for very long.

What the Bible is not, is romantic and sentimental about parenting and the human family. It begins with a tragic poignancy we often miss. The Adam and Eve story includes the observation that man and woman contribute to one another's downfall. And shortly thereafter one of their sons murders the other. Could there be parental pain any more severe than that? Noah was discovered

in a drunken stupor by one of his sons. Abraham loaned his wife to Pharoh and nearly killed his son Isaac to appease God. Jacob deceived his father, alienated his brother, successfully played his parents off against each other. His sons left their brother Joseph to die in the desert. David committed adultery and arranged for a murder to cover his tracks. His son Amnon had an incestful relationship with his half sister Tamor and was murdered by David's favorite son Absalom. Absolom started a rebellion and was killed by his father's loyal friends. The Old Testament on family and parenting is summed up in that poignant cry every parent in every age understands, "Oh Absolom! Absalom, My Son."

The Bible is anything but sentimental and romantic about mothering and fathering and being a family. But it does suggest that the family is the arena for a kind of human relationship without which human life is not possible. The family is where caring and loving happen; where they are learned and celebrated and taught and experienced. ~~That, in the Bible, is important~~. Jesus, himself, near death, underscored the strong tradition of his people by providing for the care of his mother - not only by appointing someone to see to her physical needs, but by giving her another son to love and care about - and worry about.

St. Paul, who reflected the vigorous chauvinism of his age, nevertheless set out the perimeters of life giving marriage and parenting in our text this morning. "Be subject to one another" he wrote, lifting up again that peculiar Judeo-Christian genius; namely, that true freedom happens

when you stop worrying about being free and give yourself to something or someone. Later on, in the same instructive passage he said something very unusual: "Children, honor your parents" - everyone expected that. The surprise came next, "Fathers - do not provoke your children to anger." That is, parenting carries with it the clear mandate to be responsible. And even though the old chauvinist said fathers - I'll guess that he meant mothers as well.

Toward a recovery, then, based on a Biblical tradition which is singularly honest, realistic and helpful. We reacted too strongly, it appears. We heard what the psychiatrists were saying about overbearing parents and we backed off. It wasn't a good idea. It wasn't very good advice. New evidence is convincing and disturbing. Julius Segal of the National Institute of Mental Health, in a new book, suggests that we have been [illegible]y misguided in the recent past. Citing a study of counter culture children reared in communes, children of parents devoting full time to doing their own thing" Segal points to disturbing discovereis of widespread boredom, apathy and melancholy. He concludes: "There is something much worse for a child than to suffer the domination of the stereotyped Jewish mother; namely to be the offspring of valueless, unattached, self-centered parents who are unwilling to give the time or the emotional commitment that parenting requires. (Christian Century, op cit, p. 521)

And professor Willimore of Duke ag[illegible]. "In our indictment we have overlooked the fact that here were mothers who cared and were not afraid to show it. Whether standing over a piano mercilessly coaxing a budding prodigy or arguing at the kitchen table over how many beans are enough, these mothers gave these kids something to strive for, react against, struggle with and grow away from. While their methods of child rearing may have spawned some neuroses, their children have never suffered from the anger, emptiness and despair that often haunt children denied the life-long benefits of strong, early and continuing affectional bonds." (ibid. p. 521)

So now, its being said again - out loud - in public. There is something very special about being a parent. There is a vocation of motherhood that is as demanding, difficult and important as any other - and more so. There is something very special about being a mother. It is only one half of the equation to be sure but in terms of life and being there is something very special about the simple potential of bearing new life. And if you think that's just the way men always talk about motherhood let me hasten to punctuate it with a sentence from Dolores Fiese of Notre Dame who writes about "a truth we often forget: women by virtue of biological, psychological and cultural circumstances, have access to specialized knowledge that it ill-behooves humankind as a whole to ignore."

Part of what we need to learn is a little basic theology that we should have learned long ago, and that while we address God as father, that is not a sexual designation;

that in order to have an image of God that is complete it must be feminine as well as masculine; that there is nothing in the world wrong with addressing God as mother or parent even though most of us wince when we hear it. God's image is upon us and in us. It is an image that embraces humanity; that needs feminity as well as masculinity to be complete.

God at times is the mother and nurse of Israel in the Old Testament. And on one striking occasion our Lord HImself evoked a metaphor which is unforgetable. Appraoching Jerusalem, on the way to his own death he said that he longed to gather the city about him like a hen gathers her chicks. That is a very feminine picture and a very strong one as you know if you've ever gotten between a mother hen and young chicks.

Jesus suggested that God was not unlike an overprotective, worrying mother; that he loves us enough to keep after us; that the best metaphor for his love for us is not a metaphysical abstraction, but an experience common to every human being who ever lived; parental love. So real yet it is known even by its absence.

What happened to Mother's Day? Everything that happened to our culture. Perhaps it's back now. May it be a celebration of life giving love for you today, in fact or in memory. More important, may it become a window through which you can see some small, image of God himself - and God's love for you.

Amen.

Almighty God, you are father and mother to us and we are grateful; grateful for our parents; grateful for the continuing universal love of mother and father for their children; grateful for memories of past love - and for the experience of your love - in our lives in the present. Bless us on our way; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Back in the recesses of our memory most of us can recall Mothers Day and every boy, man and many women coming to church wearing a carnation, red if your mother was alive; white if she was dead. (Or was it the other way around?) Ministers always preached about Mothers. In the small, rural parish in Indiana which was my introduction to the Institutional Church, they always sang Faith of our Fathers - and changed it to Faith of our Mothers on Mothers Day: a Roman Catholic Hymn written in a time when English Protestants were jailing & killing Catholics. "Faith of our mothers living still, In spite of dungeon, fire and sword.."

It may not have been accurate historically, nor in good taste ~~act~~ aesthetically but ~~mother~~ it was meant existentially. Mothers Day was a secular holiday the church adopted for its own, ~~[illegible]~~ ~~a~~ celebrated ~~it~~ - and enjoyed ~~it~~.

Writing in one of the leading Theological Journals, ~~Rob~~ Paul Ramsay of the Religion Department of Princeton University ~~wrote~~ observed recently.. "Mothers Day said and did something for the passage into maturity that had deep significance." I was surprised, frankly, to read that in a scholarly journal. It has been

decades since serious scholarship has said a word about Mothers Day. In fact, for years, it was a mark of theological, intellectual relevance to ignore the whole thing altogether.